ANDERSON

New Leads in the King Case

Washington—Nine years ago, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., spiritual leader of the civil rights movement, was gunned down in Memphis. An escaped convict named James Earl Ray was nailed for the murder.

Yet nagging suspicions persisted that he may have been hired by others. The public doubt finally forced a Justice Department task force to review the case. It has now concluded that Ray "was the assassin and that he acted alone."

64

House investigators, however, have challenged the Justice Department's findings. In a confidential, 16-page analysis, they have pointed out significant inconsistencies and omissions in the task force report.

Jack Anderson's column, written with Les Whitten, formerly appeared in the Long Island Press.

APR 6 1977

They note that the task force had a "multitude of leads" to pursue, yet interviewed only 30 people.

The House investigators don't pretend that they have solved the case. But they have set forth their clues in a fascinating secret report, stamped "Sensitive." Here are the highlights, in chronological order:

● While Ray was serving time in the Missouri state penitentiary, he told cellmates that he would kill King "if the price was right." Ray also was quoted as saying he intended to seek out a "businessmen's association" which allegedly had offered $100,000 for King's murder.

● On April 23, 1967, Ray escaped from the prison and had immediate access to false identities. He posed alternately as Eric Galt, Ramon George Sneyd, Paul Bridgman and John Willard. "These aliases correspond to the names of real men, all of whom lived close to one another in suburban Toronto," report the investigators. "In addition, three out of the four bear physical resemblances to Ray."

● For the next year, Ray "traveled across the United States, lived in more than a dozen cities and traveled in four foreign countries . . . A conservative estimate of his total expense would be at least $7,000. Ray himself estimates that he spent at least $9,500."

● The late William Sartor, a journalist, alleged that organized crime figures had accepted a $300,000 contract on King's life from a right-wing racist group. According to Sartor, Ray got in touch with these men in New Orleans.

● A witness has told investigators that he overheard a telephone conversation on the afternoon of the King assassination. "Frank Liberto, a person with alleged organized crime connections, said: 'Shoot the bastard. Do it this afternoon. Shoot him, even if you have to do it on the balcony, just do it.'"

● The committee has received "independent corroborations" of a possible Liberto link. A witness told of a Birmingham, Ala., gun shop owner who, before the assassination, pointed to a rifle and said: "This is the gun that is going to kill Martin Luther King." Later the witness saw the gun shop owner "in the company of Ray and Liberto."

● The Memphis police set up a surveillance post in a firehouse overlooking the motel where King spent his last fateful hours. Curiously, two black firemen were withdrawn from the post. Then a black policeman was called off the surveillance.

The investigators are also chasing down a number of other leads. They are undeterred by the cold water that the Justice Department tried to throw on their investigation. It was the Justice Department, they point out, "that supervised the initial investigation. The review was substantially a study of the existing paperwork and not a reinvestigation."